Social Policy & Society 10:4, 559–570
 doi:10.1017/S1474746411000303

Young People Living in the YMCA

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This article presents interim findings and reflections from a case study of multiply excluded homeless people in Stoke-on-Trent. The article focuses on the experiences reported by a group of twelve such people living in the YMCA hostel. From the interviews, a large number of thematic structures were identified, of which only a few are outlined here, due to restrictions on the article length. The article concludes that the YMCA has had an important impact on their lives, mostly for the better, but the nature of this impact is complex and far from being fully understood.

Introduction

Although commonly understood in terms of lacking a roof over one's head (see, for example, Daly, 1996), homelessness has never been considered to be purely a housing problem. Other factors, such as family conflict, worklessness, poverty, mental health problems, substance misuse, physical impairment and personal traumas, have all, at one time or another, been found to be associated with homelessness (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000; Bonner and Luscombe, 2009) and, by the same token, improvements in services other than housing have been found to be associated with prevention and reduction in homelessness (Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, 2005). Such factors (commonly known as 'risk' factors) can also give rise to social exclusion, or may be exclusionary in themselves (for example, worklessness could signify exclusion from the labour market). Someone who is homeless and is also significantly affected by a number of such factors could therefore be regarded as being multiply excluded homeless.

In this article, then (adapting MEAM, 2009, discussed in the themed section's introductory article), we take multiply excluded homelessness to mean: being adversely affected by a combination of these factors, including episodes of homelessness (understood as having no suitable place to stay or no rights to stay there), routinely lacking effective contact with services that can be of assistance or support and likely to be experiencing serious difficulty in achieving settled accommodation or sustaining a tenancy. We emphasise that this is a working definition only, the main focus of the research being on those homeless people who have the greatest needs or who require the most intensive and extensive support in order to solve their housing and other problems.

The research on which this article is based involved a life-course approach to studying multiply excluded people. This involved asking each person to think of their lives as a series of chapters and to tell the story of that life, how it led to where they are now and where it might take them in the future. The main aim of the research was to explore these histories in order to understand how the different multiple exclusion factors might relate to their routes into and out of homelessness. So far, the research has considered the experiences of young people living in supported accommodation. This article reviews current work within the field of multiple exclusion homelessness from the life-course perspective and then discusses these experiences.

Understanding multiple exclusion homelessness

Much of social policy is concerned with the question of the extent to which people have control over their own lives. Those in need of support from public services may be seen as victims of forces beyond their control (so-called 'structuralist' explanations) or, alternatively, they may be seen as responsible for determining their own fate (so-called 'individualist' explanations). Ethnographic studies, however, reveal a far more complex picture, in which people can be besieged and battered by the vicissitudes of life, but can still manage to carve out a space for themselves in which they shape their own futures (see, for example, Hall, 2001; Ravenhill, 2008; Gowan, 2010).

In his study of homeless young people in Bristol, for example, Hall (2001) criticised both individualist and structuralist explanations. Robinson (2008: 43) concluded from this that:

> A more informed way to understand youth homelessness is to acknowledge both of these forces at play. Young homeless people are neither the architects of their situation nor the passive objects of external forces. They are in fact both these things, attempting to find their own pathways in an environment of choice and constraint.

This is an interesting quote because it asserts that young homeless people are neither determining nor determined, yet are also both determining and determined! The problem with this is that it provides no way of assessing how much choice young homeless people may have or how powerful are the constraints that impinge upon them. It is all very well to state that homelessness results from an 'interplay between structure and agency' (as quoted from a referee of this article), but this has little meaning when we lack understanding of either 'structure' or 'agency', let alone the 'interplay' between them (for further criticism along these lines, particularly of the distinction between 'structure' and 'culture' in the context of homelessness, see Somerville, 2011).

If we want to understand the routes into and out of homelessness taken by people with multiple needs and exclusions, therefore, a more open and nuanced approach is required, focused on the nature of the stories told by these people about themselves, their dispositions and performance in different environments, their interactions with different kinds of people in different situations and so on. There is a 'structure' to such stories, but it is not the structure imagined by structuralists; and, similarly, there is an 'individuality' (a 'self' who is the subject of the narrative), but it is not the autonomous or self-determining individual imagined by rationalists and libertarians. Rather, what we see from life histories is largely a reconstruction in which the individual takes centre stage, as the leading actor

or star, but whose relationship with the world is richly ambiguous and ambivalent (see also Cloke *et al.*, 2010: 8).[1]

Much academic and policy literature tries to identify 'causes' of homelessness and seeks to measure associations between some of the risk factors mentioned above and the incidence of homelessness. Crane and Warnes, for example, concluded that homelessness among older people typically resulted from 'a combination of personal disadvantages and weaknesses, stressful events and inadequate welfare and support services' (2006: 417). With the exception of loss of tied accommodation on retirement, their homelessness did not arise from a specific housing circumstance. Social isolation also seems to be a key factor, with most homeless people of all ages having 'attenuated social networks that offer little personal support' (Crane and Warnes, 2006: 405).

Family dysfunction figures particularly strongly in the literature that looks for causes of homelessness. Randall and Brown (2001), for example, found that family conflict was consistently cited as the main immediate cause of homelessness, particularly for young people. Craig *et al.*'s (1996) longitudinal study of homeless young people in London concluded that:

> Their childhoods were characterised by multiple breakdowns in care arrangements, high levels of domestic violence and extremes of parental indifference, inconsistent supervision, and physical and sexual abuse that far outstripped that seen in their domiciled contemporaries.

Other studies have cited a range of other factors. Reeve *et al.* (2007), for example, attempted to explain women's homelessness as the result of a complex interrelation between factors of three kinds: life events and experience, housing situation and (lack of) engagement with relevant services. Numerous other studies note the importance of substance misuse as both a cause and effect of homelessness (Fountain and Howes, 2002; Kemp *et al.*, 2006; Pleace, 2008;[2] Conservative Homelessness Foundation, 2009) and its relationship with family conflict (Fountain and Howes, 2002). Still others draw attention to the association between mental health problems and homelessness (Schneider, 2007; Bilton, 2009). Lemos (2000) tried to identify the factors underlying both family conflict and substance misuse, relating to increasing fragmentation of family structures and loss of conviviality – basically, family fragmentation leads people to seek solace in drink and drugs and/or in the company of like-minded people who happen to be substance misusers. Overall, therefore, the literature identifies a wide range of factors associated with homelessness, including: family dysfunction, bad luck, social isolation, lack of support, lack of suitable affordable accommodation and personal issues (particularly substance misuse and mental health problems).

Arguably, this trend of searching for independent variables to which homelessness might relate as a dependent variable is simplistic. Robinson (2008), for example, states that the research findings on young homeless people suggest that there is no simple relationship between their homelessness and their family background, and that disadvantage in childhood can make some individuals stronger or more resilient rather than weaker or more vulnerable. Family dysfunction is itself a complex formation and includes many different factors (such as parental abuse of children, parental neglect of children, violence between parents, parental substance misuse and mental ill-health, general instability of family life and so on), each of which could count as disadvantage and be related to social functioning in different ways.

These problems with 'causal' or 'risk factor' approaches to understanding homelessness are reflected in approaches towards routes out of homelessness. It seems to be commonly believed, for example, that supportive family relationships can play a key role in helping homeless people follow this successful pathway, but the processes involved are complex and perhaps not well understood. The main complicating factor is that, as stated above, it is very often dysfunctional family relationships that have been strongly associated with their homelessness in the first place. In the case of traumatic family conflict, for example, leaving home may be a necessary step in escaping a destructive relationship. Homelessness then tends to result because typically the move is unplanned and takes place without alternative accommodation having been secured. Interestingly, the homeless young person's family can still play an important role in helping them to find ways out of this homelessness situation (Robinson, 2008).

In a similar way, it appears that peer groups can work either positively or negatively, either as 'risk' factors for homelessness or as 'buffer' factors protecting against homelessness, and as providing routes both into and out of homelessness. Studies suggest, for example, that: 'young people who have strong ties to a network of friends and other contacts, outwith their immediate living environment, are most likely to find the support necessary to establish themselves successfully as independent adults' (Robinson, 2008: 113). On the other hand, falling in with the 'wrong crowd' can play an important part both in leading to homelessness and in blocking possible routes out of homelessness.

Young homeless people's experience of hostels

'Hostels' is a word traditionally used to refer to transitional accommodation for homeless people with some form of residential support. According to Robinson (2008), there are five main categories of such accommodation: direct access hostels, low support hostels, medium support hostels (small number of staff available during the day, providing practical support and preparation for independent living), high support hostels (larger number of staff available 24/7, providing a wide range of emotional and practical support, possibly including specialist counselling) and foyers.[3] In their research across Britain from 2001 to 2004, Cloke *et al*. (2010) identified 212 night shelters and hostels, and noted that almost a fifth of these hostels offer only basic 'night shelter' accommodation and classified most hostels as offering 'high support'.

Many studies have commented on the difficulties experienced by single homeless people generally, and young single homeless in particular, in accessing help from statutory services generally, and hostels in particular. For example, Bannister *et al*. (1993) commented that relationships between services and homeless young people were characterised by mutual distrust, while Reid and Klee (1999: 17), in a study of 200 homeless people aged fourteen to twenty-five in Greater Manchester, concluded that: 'Overall, respondents found particular difficulties in accessing help from statutory services, such as housing and health.' Shelter (2005) found that young homeless people who were denied priority status (for example, as 'vulnerable') had a negative experience of local authority homelessness services, and those who became homeless as a result of failure to follow parental rules were being judged to be intentionally homeless.

The experience of homelessness itself has certain effects that make it more difficult for homeless young people to take advantage of whatever help might be available to them (Robinson, 2008). Robinson believes that most young homeless people are no more

vulnerable than any other young people – or rather, their vulnerability relates only to their experience of homelessness itself and the trauma often involved in this. There are a few, however, who show signs of being 'chronically isolated' and 'largely immune to most of the practical strategies available to support them'. These are typically the ones who are said to lead 'chaotic lives' (Robinson, 2008: 110–11).[4]

Under the Labour government's Homelessness Action Programme from 1999 onwards, hostels have been placed under increasing pressure to accept those with high support needs (a group that is roughly equivalent to what this article has called multiply excluded homeless, and who are most likely to be 'chronically isolated' and leading 'chaotic lives'), but these are precisely the people for whom it is most difficult to find suitable move-on accommodation and support. As a result, 'Britain's hostels are silting up' (Cloke *et al.*, 2010: 163).

In an important section entitled 'The myth of high support', Cloke *et al.* adduce a variety of evidence, both narrative and photographic, to show that 'many hostels struggle to provide a decent environment for their residents' (2010: 165). The researchers conclude that most hostels are seedbeds for tensions between 'drinkers', 'junkies' and 'straightheads', with an ever-present risk of physical violence to all who live or work there. In response to such risks, hostels have become increasingly security conscious, but this makes them seem more like prisons and further alienates residents from staff, making it more difficult for them to interact productively. Some hostels seem to be even worse than prisons because the staff do not appear to care what is going on, leaving residents to 'face the chaos of hostel life alone' (Cloke *et al.*, 2010: 173).

The experience of young people living in Stoke YMCA

Methodology and analytical frame

In our research, we aim to interview at least a hundred people from a variety of backgrounds, genders and ages, who are broadly reflective of the homeless and multiply excluded population of the study area. The study seeks to explore the life histories of the people concerned and to see how homelessness contributes, if at all, to those histories. The findings for this article, however, relate only to twelve of these, who were all, at the time of their interviews, living in the YMCA hostel in Stoke-on-Trent (a 'high support' hostel). Of these twelve, eleven were male and one female; three were sixteen to nineteen and nine were twenty to twenty-nine; all described themselves as White British; and eight had experienced a single episode of homelessness, while four had suffered multiple episodes.

Asking people who have and are living often chaotic lives to tell us about their multiple experiences and journeys to their present situations invites stories to be told. The framework for generation of narratives adopted for this study drew significantly upon the work of McAdams (1993) who provided a number of key questions to help guide the narrative interview. These questions include ascertaining details of an individual's self-identified 'life chapters', key events, significant people, stresses and problems, and hopes for the future. Following the advice of McAdams (1993), this approach was adapted to suit the individuals being interviewed.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and entered into NVivo software. The analytical process followed the description identified by Clandinin and Connelly who argued that analysis should adopt the general lens of understanding the

world within 'storied landscapes' (2000: 128) where transcripts are searched and 're-searched' for such things as 'patterns, narrative threads, tensions and themes' (2000: 133). The research team commenced a process of reflection, descriptive and interpretative analysis in order to facilitate the development of a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1972) of the lives of the story-tellers. The analysis was carried out collaboratively in order to discuss emerging themes and reflect on our understanding.

From our initial analysis, we have identified twenty separate interpretative thematic structures. Two points are worth noting about these structures to date: first, homelessness appears only as one thematic structure among many – nothing is presumed about the nature of the relationship between homelessness and all the other structures; and, second, although the themes contain issues that are familiar from the literature (and particularly from Reeve *et al*., 2009), there are others that are more psychological in nature (e.g. the role of memories, reflections of the story-teller and characteristics such as stubbornness) or more typical of a narrative form (e.g. important people, turning points, future plans).

Findings and analysis

The findings presented here explore the experience of the hostel through perceptions, experiences and overall evaluation. Findings which explore the broader and interconnected experiences of homelessness through personal narratives and social contexts will be presented in subsequent articles.

Perceptions of hostels. None of the interviewees knew anything about hostels before they entered one, which they did only as a last resort, and most of them had not questioned the received wisdom about such places:

> how I was brought up, these places are seen as like … lowlifes and scumbags and druggies and people who'd go out and rob your grandma and stuff like that. (Gary)[5]

For most of the young people, however, the hostel turned out to be a not altogether unpleasant environment, in which they met people 'in the same boat' (Christian) as themselves, and made many new friends (Patrick). Some reported that the YMCA had really helped them to sort out their lives, in a variety of ways, such as offering them voluntary work at the hostel (Carly), getting them to see a doctor about their mental health problems (Lee), providing practical support and activities to keep them on the straight and narrow (Ollie), offering alternatives to substance misuse (Andy) and generally providing diversion, fun and entertainment that helped develop their social skills (Matty, Neil).

However, it was clear that a person's positive experience of the hostel relied on being 'streetwise' and adhering to the rules – both formal and informal:

> I've been in here since September last year, so it's been quite a long time. It has and it hasn't [changed me]. Sometimes it gets you miserable and then you think about it … it just depends what kind of people come in here. [For example], if you get people who want to cause trouble. But I've never had no trouble here. Sometimes, people do have their off days. Members of staff try to help you as much as they can. To me it's just like being in a big care home. (Neil)

Negative experiences of hostels. For some interviewees, the negative image of hostels continued:

> I wouldn't bring her [my kid] here to the YMCA. I see people bringing their kids here and I think to myself 'How can you do that?' Cos I have got standards like. (Ollie)

Ollie had a great deal more experience of living in supported accommodation than the majority of interviewees. He had lived for years on the streets and in a variety of hostels, including bail hostels. He had once been evicted from the YMCA for fighting and using heroin. He had many negative memories of hostels, but these memories were now motivating him towards more independent living:

> I've seen people go over on heroin. I've seen people die. I've seen people have heart attacks in there. Basically, I've just seen a lot of things. I've seen people get beat up. I've seen people get broken into, getting stuff nicked off them . . . I've seen things in all the hostels I've lived in and I just don't want to see that no more and that's it.

Most of the interviewees narrated their reasons for being in the hostel as a way to achieve some sort of rehabilitation – 'that's why I've come here, to try and sort myself out. Give myself a better level' (Shaun). 'I moved into the Salvation Army for a month just to get my life sorted' (Fraser). Achieving this, however, was proving to be difficult in some cases. Shaun, for example, felt that living in a hostel/communal environment was like being a carefree teenager again: 'At first it was just a laugh. It was like I was eighteen, twenty again, you know. Fucking just a doss.' But as his reflection progressed, the novelty of this soon wore off:

> The immaturity of a lot of the people in here. Like when you're bored, the first thing everybody thinks of is 'What shall we do? Shall we go get three litres of cider?' It's summat you used to do when you were a kid, man, dead young and that. People'll be in the room one minute, just sat watching telly and that, and then they'll go downstairs and make a right tit of themselves. Getting hammered or whatever.

Shaun's view of the hostel seems to be very much influenced by the fact that he had had a relationship with another resident, which was now said to be over:

> I moved in here and two weeks later I got with her and it just seems to have like you say just go with the flow . . . She's split up with me because I was supposedly cheating on her, cos I was getting a text off one of my exes. I was 'Well if that's what you believe, you fucking believe it.' So she went and chucked all her shit out of here, cos she was in here with me, and moved into her other room . . . [The problem with the hostel is that] you end up in a relationship again, because it's boring [in the hostel] and then it gets serious and then it's like going over it again.

This was narrated as a relationship formed out of boredom and convenience which Shaun himself identified as destructive and inhibiting his rehabilitation:

> That's why I'm here now, but I only moved in here to sort myself out. Seems all I've done is fuck my own head up again, d'you know what I mean?

Some interviewees criticised the staff in some hostels for caring only about money and not about their clients (Fraser and Carly). Carly reported that some staff had told her that they hate their jobs, and that:

> We do more for each other than the staff do for us. Like myself, I'm getting out of here because I did the work, not because the staff did anything. (Carly)

Overall evaluation of the YMCA. Some interviewees commented very favourably on the support that the YMCA provided:

> You've got support when you're in here, helping you get your own place. You still get support when you move out. When you move into your own place you get floating support. That's just what you get in Stoke. (Ollie)

> The experience I've had in the YMCA and the help I've had [has been] fantastic like, [for example] with filling the forms to apply for housing and that. I really struggle with stuff like that, but the people at the YMCA really helped me out. I think it's a good thing that there is a place like this, where people are [at] rock bottom or [have] problems and there is somewhere that will take them in. (Patrick)

Fraser had clear ideas about how the YMCA needed to change:

> It's not a business, it's a charity place, but if people don't pay their rent [cos] they got sick, they go mental like. I know you can't go overboard, but sometimes you've got to look past it for a little bit, you know. They need to stop treating it like it's a business and treat it like it's a charity. Be like it's supposed to be.

Similarly, Carly reported:

> Because I got a job, the YMCA turned round and said 'Right, you've got to get out for getting a job', so they kicked me out. [Interviewer: Really?] Yeah, that's what they said to me: 'Can't afford to live here, move on.' So I had to get a place pretty quick, so me and my mate who lived here got a place together.

Neil suggested that the YMCA could provide more activities, but was not sure what difference this would make:

> I think they give you brilliant support here. I would like, say, a bit more activities, cos people sit in the canteen miserable, slagging the YMCA off, but at least they're here, because they had nowhere else to go before. Now they've thrown activities in with it, you know, people just moan for the sake of it. As long as I've got a roof over my head and a bed to sleep in at night time I'm grateful for that and I've got somewhere stable to stay, you know. And the staff are brilliant, they try and help you out as much as they can. Yeah, it's a good place to stay.

Neil and Matty were very positive about the YMCA generally:

> There's always someone you can talk to and you can have a laugh with people . . . I go to a boxing club for free on a Tuesday night . . . I've done volunteering with a mate. I've met some good people in here, who've given me a chance to work. Even though it's volunteer work, I've had a laugh. (Neil)

> They do put things on. They're always asking people what they want in the YMCA and what they want to do, different stuff. So they're trying. I think they're good. They're always trying to find out what you want to do. (Matty)

Similarly to the expectations that a number of people had about the restorative opportunity the YMCA presented, Neil and Ollie regarded the YMCA as a turning point in their lives:

> I'm settled here. I've got myself a job. I can see myself turning, once I get my own place . . . I feel like I'm doing stuff. I'm doing voluntary work. A couple of weeks ago I helped an old person move and I felt really good because I helped somebody. If I was with the wrong crowd, I wouldn't have even bothered doing that. (Neil)

> This is my turning point now, because I've woke up. There's a big wide world out there and I've been in and I want to go back out there knowing that I've got my own place, everything in the house is mine, I own, not what somebody else owns. So basically I'm in here now to turn my life around, to move out, to move on. I moved in here to move on to my own property. Then I can sit back and say: 'I've done this myself with no help.' So basically, that's my goal now. To turn my life around, get my own place so I can have my little one at weekends. That's it. (Ollie)

Discussion and conclusions

The stories told in these interviews tend to support Robinson's (2008) argument that there is nothing inherently 'different' about young homeless people. All of the interviewees have experienced serious problems in their lives, and some may have led 'chaotic lives' in the past, but in all cases their circumstances seem to have improved and become more stable.

In other respects, however, the findings throw into question, or even contradict, previous findings from Robinson (2008). For example, it does not appear that the young people in this research had particularly high expectations from hostel provision (as reported by Robinson, 2008). It also seems clear that the feelings of young residents about their fellow residents were more ambivalent than Robinson suggests – that is, they formed friendships with some, while distancing themselves from others. There was no evidence to support the claim that building bonds with fellow residents militated against doing the same in the community outside the hostel. Nor did the interviews bring to light any evidence for a need to form an informal support group of hostel residents to help them move on to independent accommodation (as claimed by Robinson, 2008). On the contrary, the interviews tended to highlight the importance of key workers in the hostel, with friends playing a role in filling the gap when staff support seemed to be lacking. It may be that the interviewees were all now 'straightheads' and therefore saw themselves as 'better' (more mature, cleaner, tidier, etc.) than the 'pissheads' and 'smackheads', but most of them had experience of being in these other two groups in the past, and this could

help to explain why the tensions between these groups reported by Cloke *et al*. (2010) seemed to be less of a problem in the Stoke YMCA.

For a number of interviewees, there has clearly been a certain amount of 'churning', 'that sees many homeless people move from the streets, to hostels, to hospital or prison, only to end up back in a hostel again several months later' (Cloke *et al*., 2010: 163). The 'causes' of this, however, are far from clear. It may be due to lack of affordable accommodation or lack of follow-up support, or it may be the result of the 'chaotic lives' led by these particular young people. While not insignificant in itself, their homelessness may be symptomatic of deeper problems that they are experiencing or have experienced in the past, such as being abused by their fathers, heroin addiction, mental health problems, learning difficulties, long-term involvement in serious crime and a history of broken and/or violent relationships. This finding therefore strongly supports the findings of Reeve *et al*. (2009) and of Ravenhill (2008) concerning the themes that emerge from research into the life histories of multiply excluded homeless people.

What perhaps stands out most clearly from these interviews is the impact that the YMCA has had on the lives of these young people. Some have had very bad experiences in hostels, some complain about the uncaring attitudes of some of the staff and, in some cases, the YMCA appears to have contributed to the continuation of their problems. Nevertheless, most interviewees reported that the YMCA had effected a big improvement in their lives and, in some cases, a real turning point towards a more stable future adult life (with jobs, housing, etc.). This seems to be the most salient finding. Their evaluation of the YMCA appeared to depend very much on how the process of moving into that hostel fitted into their life history up to that point – for example, whether it continued a pattern of behaviour that they wanted to break (as in the case of Sean) or constituted a break from a downward spiral of self-destruction (particularly Ollie); whether it took place when their lives were at their most chaotic (for example, Carly) or when they were more ready to organise their own futures (Neil, Ollie). If we are to improve our understanding of their homelessness, therefore, it is necessary to see it first in its context as an event or set of events in their life history, rather than, for example, as a special kind of end state or 'problem' that is systematically related to a range of allegedly causative factors.

Notes

1 On the basis of an ethnographic study of homeless people in San Francisco, Gowan (2010) makes what is possibly a more useful distinction between 'sin talk', 'sick talk' and 'system talk', in which homelessness is said to result from the homeless person's own actions (criminality, irresponsible behaviour, etc), health problems (mental or physical) or the failures of market and state provision. The point is, however, that all of these are just forms of 'talk' and provide only a superficial understanding of how homeless people lead their lives.

2 Pleace's (2008) review of the international literature concluded that there is strong evidence of a mutually reinforcing relationship between substance misuse and homelessness. An experience of homelessness increases the risk of substance misuse among previously abstinent people, while entering into substance misuse increases the risk of becoming homeless. There is evidence that when someone is homeless and misusing substances, one compounds the other. There is also a strong association between mental health problems and homeless with substance misuse problems.

3 Robinson (2008) also lists a sixth category, namely ordinary housing with floating support rather than residential support.

4 Furlong *et al*. (2003), for example, in a longitudinal study of youth transitions in the West of Scotland, found about 6 per cent of young people experienced chaotic transitions, with high levels of

unemployment. They were more likely to lack family support and not to be in a position where they could benefit from improved educational opportunities.

5 The names of all the respondents have been changed in order to ensure their anonymity.

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